

Steve Irsik – part 1

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Pioneers. They were the brave men and women who came west and settled the state of Kansas. Today we honor those pioneers, but we also honor the modern-day entrepreneurs who have pioneered modern approaches to agribusiness. One such entrepreneur has built a remarkable agribusiness enterprise in southwest Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Steve Irsik is an agricultural entrepreneur whose family has built a remarkable ag enterprise. His family has deep roots in western Kansas. In fact, it is a true story of pioneers.

"My grandmother came to Dodge City in 1880 on a stagecoach," Steve Irsik said. It sounds like a western movie, but it's true. The Irsik side of the family came west to Kansas in the 1920s. These pioneers settled in southwest Kansas and built homes and farms.

Steve Irsik's father served in the south Pacific during World War II and came back to the farm. Steve Irsik was born and raised near Garden City. He went to K-State, studied agricultural economics, and served in the U.S. Air Force during the Vietnam era.

When Steve came back to join his family in the farming operation, the irrigation and feedlot industries were beginning to be developed. The Irsiks were pioneers in this type of agribusiness.

"My dad bought a farm which had the second irrigation well in western Kansas," Steve said. "My father and two brothers started feeding cattle in 1961. That was just the second or third feedyard in southwest Kansas." Before that time, farmer-feeders had been raising a few head individually to be butchered or sold. Feedyards became a more efficient way to produce finished cattle. Then beef packing plants were built in western Kansas so as to be close to the source of production. The agribusiness complex boomed.

The Irsik family was a leading part of the agribusiness growth. Their first feedyard built in 1961 had a capacity of 2,000 head. Today that feedyard's capacity is 40,000 head. Wow.

Irsik Farms is now a dryland and irrigated farming and ranching operation with ranches in Kansas and Nebraska, including an 1,800 head cowherd. Irsik & Doll is a related business with feedyards and grain elevators across southwest Kansas. Irsik & Doll elevators are located in communities from Hutchinson to Sublette. The feedyards are in rural locations in southwest Kansas, near towns such as Garden City, Scott City, Cimarron, Hugoton, and Pierceville. Pierceville has a population of perhaps 300 people. Now, that's rural.

Part of the success of the Irsik family farming operation has been to integrate the various elements of the beef value chain.

"We go all the way from beef cattle genetic development clear to the meat cooler," Steve Irsik said.

Steve was also part of pioneering initiatives to market ag products such as the 21st Century Alliance grain processing cooperative and U.S. Premium Beef. These farmer-investors bought a flour mill in Texas and an oat-milling company in Nebraska. "If you

ate granola, you probably ate some of our oats,” Steve said. “If you ate a tortilla in New Mexico or west Texas, the flour probably came from our flour mill.”

In the process of building these businesses, Steve got to know private equity investors in Dallas and elsewhere. He joined them in other investments such as a steel pipe company in Vermont, a food manufacturer in Massachusetts, and a wholesale vegetable distributor in Florida. The food manufacturing company, for example, produces products that are marketed under major brand names such as Hersheys and Nestle. “These companies want to market their brand, but they don’t want to do the manufacturing,” Steve said. So, this company produces the powdered chocolate drink, but it is sold under the Hersheys brand. These are innovative ways of marketing.

Pioneers. Those brave men and women came west and built the state of Kansas. Now modern pioneers such as the Irsik family are leading the way in innovations of modern production agriculture. We commend Steve Irsik and family for making a difference as pioneers of today.

And there’s more. Steve Irsik was also a pioneer in another form of the cattle business – but not beef. We’ll learn about that next week.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.